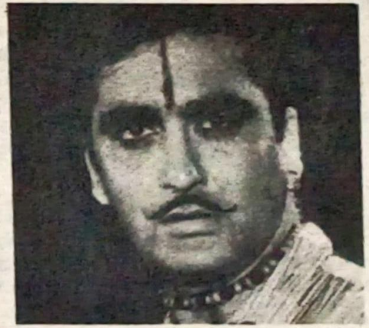
Concrete jungle gives fans a bird's eye-view into the lives of actors who have hungered for privacy since time immemorial

Movie-mad metropolis hems film stars in

M S M DESAI
APRIL 10, 2002

AWAY from the rapacious glare of the public eye and the thirsting arc lights, Mumbai's many film personalities snuggle into their idyllic bungalows for some precious privacy. But as buildings explode ever-upward in a fast-evolving concrete jungle, their sprawling spaces become arenas where walls of curious windows admit the inquisitive glint of binoculars, the peering of hungry eyes and the rattle and hum of traffic. While Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhosale's have highlighted these concerns by joining the chorus against the flyover at Peddar Road (where they live), the problems have plagued stars from time immemorial.

When Nargis Dutt moved into her secluded bungalow at Pali Hill, there was not a building near by. She moved there to escape the constant racket of cars zooming by her Marine Drive home. Within 10 years, high-rises began dotting her patch of sky and I remember her complaining that her privacy was gone forever. Nargis and Sunil Dutt's slew of parties, particularly the extravagant New Year bashes, unfolded with ritual punctuality on their terrace gar-



Sunil Dutt

den. At one of these in the mid-seventies, I remember her showing me the new building that had sprung up in front of her home with obvious distress. She pointed out how people in that building peered into their lives with binoculars. She told me that they have no privacy as Pali Hill was turning into a concrete jungle. Attempting to complain to the authorities resulted in no action as they could not prevent the buildings from coming up, she had lamented. Hardly a stone's throw away stands Dilip Kumar's bungalow, a

Dilip Kumar

star who has always had an aura of privacy around him. One day while we were sitting amidst the leafy shade of the many trees in his backyard, he pointed to a neighbouring skyscraper and said "they are watching us". A man of many political connections, Kumar has never complained about the many invasion of his peace! With privacy shattered here, Kumar shifted to Saira Banu's bungalow within a year of their marriage. When the inevitable buildings started appearing here, Saira and Kumar constructed a sky-scraper in the vacant land on their property to safeguard some privacy. The ground, first and second floors are reserved as offices as Saira was making a television serial.

Nargis Dutt

The tramp of surburbia has claimed the private lives of many stars. Jeetendra bought Bharat Bhushan's bungalow at Pali Hill only to face a similar situation while Rajendra Kumar, who owned a bungalow at Pali Hill with much empty space behind it, started a preview theatre to prevent sky-scrapers from coming up there. Similarly, Asha Parekh purchased land at Juhu Koliwada when there were practically no buildings there to escape the congested surrounds of her bungalow near Santacruz Police Station. She built a bungalow there to enjoy the sea breeze but when sky-scrapers invaded the communes of fisherfolk, she built herself a high-rise, keeping a few flats for herself to preserve her privacy.

Hiten Chowdhury, who co-produced films in Bombay Talkies, had to sell his bungalow at Pali Hill to accommodate a high-rise building. While Sadhana lived in a bungalow on South Avenue at Santa Cruz, her producer-husband R K Nayyar owned a sprawling bungalow at Pali Hill. I remember his engagement party there. Almost the whole of Bollywood arrived and was accommodated. Yet, he too was forced to move to Khar where he purchased a bungalow.

In the final analysis, then, stars have little privacy in a city where land is scarce and expensive and sky-scrapers are the only answer to an ever increasing population.

Shah Rukh Khan, with your secluded seaside bungalow, are you listening?